DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 479 419 IR 022 096

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TITLE Designing Authentic Activities in Web-Based Courses.

SPONS AGENCY Australian Research Council.

PUB DATE 2002-10-00

NOTE 11p.; In: E-Learn 2002 World Conference on E-Learning in Corporate, Government, Healthcare, & Higher Education. Proceedings (7th, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, October 15-19, 2002); see IR 022 093.

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PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS

DESCRIPTORS *Computer Assisted Instruction; Constructivism (Learning); Distance Education; *Instructional Design; *Instructional Development; *Instructional Innovation; *Learning Activities; Online Systems; Teaching Methods; World Wide Web

IDENTIFIERS *Authentic Learning; Authentic Materials

ABSTRACT

Influenced by constructivist philosophy and advances in technology, there is increasing interest in authentic activities as a basis for learning in both face-to-face and Web-based courses. Whereas traditionally, activities have primarily served as vehicles for practice of skills or processes, a more radical approach is to build a whole course of study around authentic activities and tasks. This paper presents the case that the value of authentic activity is not constrained to learning in real-life locations and practice, but can be analyzed for the critical characteristics that help to enhance learning in online contexts. It continues with a description of the theory, research, and development initiatives that provide the foundations for this approach. Finally, guidelines for the design of complex authentic activities for online learning and examples are presented, together with the implications of this approach for teachers, students, and designers. (Contains 43 references.) (Author)

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# Designing Authentic Activities in Web-based Courses

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**Abstract**: Influenced by constructivist philosophy and advances in technology, there is increasing interest in authentic activities as a basis for learning in both face-to-face and web-based courses. Whereas traditionally, activities have primarily served as vehicles for practice of skills or processes, a more radical approach is to build a whole course of study around authentic activities and tasks. This presentation will put the case that the value of authentic activity is not constrained to learning in real-life locations and practice, but can be analysed for the critical characteristics that help to enhance learning in online contexts. It will continue with a description of the theory, research, and development initiatives that provide the foundations for this approach. Finally, guidelines for the design of complex authentic activities for online learning and examples will be presented, together with the implications of this approach for teachers, students and designers.

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## Introduction

Teachers have long recognised the advantages of learning in authentic situations. The apprenticeship system was once the primary method for education and training in skills and processes relevant to the workplace. Professional practice, where students spend days or weeks performing in the workplace, is an authentic method for learning the practices of a profession. In higher education and schools, teachers facilitate groups of students performing authentic practices with real consequences and outcomes: students are assisted to form fully operational businesses, to diagnose illnesses in real patients, to form video and multimedia production teams with real clients, and to conduct scientific experiments and data collection on the Internet.

The merits of such engaging and authentic learning environments have been well documented, particularly in reference to situated learning (e.g., Honebein, Duffy, & Fishman, 1993; Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; McLellan, 1996; Duffy, Lowyck, & Jonassen, 1993; Wilson, 1996; McLellan, 1997; Bennett, Harper, & Hedberg, 2001; Luca & Oliver, 2001). Nevertheless, the evidence for real-life experiences is not always positive. For example, in discussing apprenticeships in relation to situated cognition, Winchburg (1989) noted: "No doubt some apprentices find their apprenticeship absolutely authentic, but I can imagine others who find it absolutely tedious, inefficient, repressive, servile, tradition-bound, and in some cases, downright mean" (p. 9). Lave and Wenger (1991) also noted that the quality and consistency of apprenticeships vary enormously. They argued that apprenticeships do not inevitably result in learning in practice. Included in a series of case studies, they give the example of apprentice butchers who were used in ways more consistent with profit-making than incorporating them into the practice of meat-cutting. For example, a new apprentice might be assigned to the automatic wrapping machine and stay on that single task for years until a new apprentice comes along. Lave and Wenger argued that the apprenticeship itself is not the issue. There can be apprenticeships where "masters prevent learning by acting in effect as pedagogical authoritarians" (p. 76). The critical issue for them, and the real value of these experiences, is the "legitimate peripheral participation" the apprenticeship allows. Even when real experience works well, it is not always possible for teachers to organise these authentic learning experiences in real life settings for reasons such as the limitations of the subject matter, practical constraints such as physically moving students to locations of practice, and precautions against risk of danger to students.

The argument advanced in this paper is that the value of authentic activity is not constrained to learning in real-life locations and practice, but can be analysed for the critical characteristics that help to enhance learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) cautioned that the conception of situated learning was substantially "more encompassing in intent than conventional notions of "learning in situ" or "learning by doing" for which it was used as a rough equivalent" (p. 31). The challenge they put to researchers was to identify the critical aspects of situated learning to enable it to translate into teaching methods that could be applied in the classroom. Together with my colleagues, the purpose of my current research is to distil those elements that contribute to the success of authentic learning environments, to analyse the antecedents and mediating variables, and to provide guidelines for the

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design of activities to embody those characteristics. Such characteristics can then be applied in a variety of learning contexts, such as simulations, case studies, role-plays, and scenarios, in the classroom and in online learning situations.

**Authentic Activities**

Activities, investigations and problems have always been at the heart of student involvement in meaningful learning contexts. Teachers provide such activities to enable students to interact with the learning environment, and so learn, apply and practice newly acquired skills. Activities have been defined by Bayley and Allieman (1991) as: "Anything students are expected to do, beyond getting input through reading or listening, in order to learn, practice, apply, evaluate, or in any other way respond to curricular content" (p. 9).

However, a well-designed activity can be so much more than an opportunity for students to practice and apply their learning. In this paper, it is proposed that the activity students perform as they complete a course of study is the single most important element in the design of the learning environment. A complex and sustained activity can motivate students to learn. It can provide meaning and relevance to complex content, enable collaborative problem solving, justify the creation of polished products, and provide integrated assessment of achievement. It can be the central organising element of an entire course of study.

There is no lack of research and literature written on the use of authentic activities over the past decade or more. There has been a great deal written about the differences between the kinds of activities and problems we face in real-world situations and those typically designed into courses of study. For example, Sternberg, Wagner and Okagaki (1993) differentiated between the kinds of problems learners face in academic situations and practical, real-world applications. They contended that academic problems tend to be: formulated by others, well-defined, complete in the information they provide, characterised by having only one correct answer, characterised by having only one method of obtaining the correct answer, disembedded from ordinary experience, and of little or no intrinsic interest. For example, it is unlikely that the following typical mathematics textbook exercise would ever be encountered in this form in any real context, or that students would necessary know when to apply it in appropriate circumstances:

> 2x + 1 = 7. Solve for x

Similarly word problems, while attempting to provide a real-world context, fail to replicate the essential elements of a meaningful and realistic problem. For example:

> Jenny and her friend left Strasbourg to visit a winery. They bought 3 one-litre bottles of wine, 5 bottles each containing 750 millilitres and two half-litre bottles of wine. What was the total quantity of wine bought?

Why does the student need to know how much wine Jenny bought? If the total was needed to write on a customs declaration, or Jenny needed to calculate her likely blood alcohol level after consuming this wine, this is important contextual information that is missing from the problem description. As it stands, the problem remains a simple and pointless algorithm dressed up with a few words. Bottge and Hasselbring (1993) have pointed out that such word problems are inadequate because: they describe situations in a textual rather than a contextual form; they typically include key words such as 'in all' or 'how many more' that can trigger a specific number operation—unlike real problems that offer no such clues; and there is usually only a single correct answer, which takes only a few minutes to solve (p. 36). Such activities often lead only to an enculturation into the practices of classrooms rather than the real-world transfer teachers expect. Clayden, Desforges, Mills and Rawson (1994) noted that students' efforts to make sense of classroom activities generally lead them to focus on working practices rather than abstract ideas. "What they learn ... is how to do work, how to be neat, how to finish on time" (p. 164).

In direct contrast to the academic approach, practical problems tend to be characterised by: the key roles of problem recognition and definition, the ill-defined nature of the problem, substantial information seeking, multiple correct solutions, multiple methods of obtaining solutions, the availability of relevant prior experience, and often highly motivating and emotionally involving contingencies (Sternberg et al., 1993, p. 206). Key differences between the school-based approach and real life approach have also been developed and summarised by Lebow and Wager (1994) (Table 1).

**Table 1: Real-life versus in-school problem solving (Lebow & Wager, 1994)**

| Real-life | In-school |
|---|---|
| 1. Involves ill formulated problems and ill structured conditions. | 1. Involves 'textbook' examples and well structured conditions. |



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| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2. | Problems are embedded in a specific and meaningful context. | 2. | Problems are largely abstract and decontextualized. |
| 3. | Problems have depth, complexity and duration. | 3. | Problems lack depth, complexity, and duration. |
| 4. | Involves cooperative relations and shared consequences. | 4. | Involves competitive relations and individual assessment. |
| 5. | Problems are perceived as real and worth solving. | 5. | Problems typically seem artificial with low relevance for students. |

While the differentiation between the two approaches is largely within the context of school (and to some extent university) classrooms, the same distinctions may be drawn for the design of online learning environments. In completing activities and solving problems, students frequently learn to invoke 'sub-optimal' schemes to enable them to proceed, rather than deal with the content in a way that promotes true understanding. Many of these online programs are so "well designed", they fail to account for the nature of real-world problem solving, where the solution is rarely neat and the salient facts are rarely the only ones at students' disposal.

In contrast, a number of authors suggest that authentic activities should be ill-defined – students *find* as well as *solve* the problems. Learners need to have the opportunity to: explore a situation with all the complexity and uncertainty of the real world, have a role in determining the task and how it might be broken up into smaller tasks, select relevant information, and find solutions that suit their needs. For instance, Myers (1993) developed three criteria for measuring the authenticity of an activity: (1) the activity provides opportunities for the students to achieve something that they perceive as real or genuine; (2) the activity challenges, inspires and empowers learners to take risks and exceed personal limitations; and (3) the activity makes some difference in the lives of the learners (p. 72). Others have also discussed the importance of providing an authentic context to the task. Jonassen (1991) noted that authentic activities have real-world relevance and utility, and integrate those tasks across the curriculum (p. 29). Similarly, Bransford, Vye, Kinzer and Risko (1990b) described the following criteria of authentic activities that maximise the effectiveness of the approach:

- A single complex problem should be investigated by the students
- Students identify and define their own questions
- Students must have the opportunity to experience the problem from a number of different perspectives
- Students work on the problem over a "reasonably long period of time" (p. 394), that is weeks rather than days
- Activities are logically related to the problem.

Young (1993) has also listed the attributes of real-life problems which need, where possible, to be replicated in authentic activities. The problem must provide:

- Ill structured complex goals
- Opportunity for the detection of relevant versus irrelevant information
- Active/generative engagement in defining problems as well as solving them
- Involvement of the student's beliefs and values
- An opportunity to engage in collaborative interpersonal activities (p. 45).

Many other theorists and researchers (e.g., Gordon, 1998; Lebow & Wager, 1994) have also emphasised the importance of designing collaborative, rather than independent, learning activities, and others such as Duchastel (1997) have pointed out the importance of diversity, rather than uniformity, of outcome. The Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt (1990b) have stressed the importance of complexity and the necessity to provide an environment capable of sustained examination.

Some argue that it is impossible to design truly 'authentic' learning experiences. Petraglia (1998) argued that authenticity can be neither 'predetermined nor preordained', and such attempts often result in little more than 'preauthentication', that is, 'the attempt to make learning materials and environments correspond to the real world prior to the learner's interaction with them' (p. 53). In supporting this view, Barab, Squire and Dueber (2000) argued that authenticity occurs 'not in the learner, the task, or the environment, but in the dynamic interactions among these various components ... authenticity is manifest in the flow itself, and is not an objective feature of any one component in isolation' (p. 38). Petraglia (1998) contended that learners need to be *persuaded* that they are participating in an authentic learning environment. This theme is also adopted by Kantor, Waddington and Osgood (2000) who, when referring to the kinds of goal-based scenarios they designed for Anderson Consulting, argued that: 'It is a simulation of a client engagement in which the participants tacitly agree to go along with an interpretation of job reality which we have crafted' (p. 212).

According to Cronin (1993), the message for designers and teachers of online learning environments is a simple one: in designing authentic activities, 'students' experiences ... should more closely resemble the experiences they encounter in real life' (p. 80).

**10 Characteristics of Authentic Activities**

As described above, many writers and theorists have suggested quite specific design criteria of activities which, if implemented, might enhance students' learning as they engage in tasks that reflect the critical characteristics of genuine roles and activities of professionals in real world settings. In reflecting on the characteristics of authentic activities described by researchers, we have derived ten design characteristics of more authentic activities (c.f., Reeves, Herrington, & Oliver, 2002):

1. *Authentic activities have real world relevance*
   Activities match as nearly as possible the real-world tasks of professionals in practice rather than decontextualised or classroom-based tasks (e.g., Lebow & Wager, 1994; Cumin, 1993; Oliver & Omari, 1999; Brown et al., 1989; Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990a; Jonassen, 1991; Resnick, 1987; Winn, 1993)
2. *Authentic activities are ill-defined, requiring students to define the tasks and sub-tasks needed to complete the activity*
   Problems inherent in the activities are ill-defined and open to multiple interpretations rather than easily solved by the application of existing algorithms. Learners must identify their own unique tasks and sub-tasks in order to complete the major task (e.g., Sternberg et al., 1993; Lebow & Wager, 1994; Bransford et al., 1990b; Brown et al., 1989; Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990a; Winn, 1993)
3. *Authentic activities comprise complex tasks to be investigated by students over a sustained period of time*
   Activities are completed in days, weeks and months rather than minutes or hours, requiring significant investment of time and intellectual resources (e.g., Lebow & Wager, 1994; Bransford et al., 1990b; Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990b; Bransford et al., 1990b; Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990b; Jonassen, 1991)
4. *Authentic activities provide the opportunity for students to examine the task from different perspectives, using a variety of resources*
   The task affords learners the opportunity to examine the problem from a variety of theoretical and practical perspectives, rather than a single perspective that learners must imitate to be successful. The use of a variety of resources rather than a limited number of preselected references requires students to detect relevant from irrelevant information (e.g., Sternberg et al., 1993; Bransford et al., 1990b; Young, 1993; Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990b)
5. *Authentic activities provide the opportunity to collaborate*
   Collaboration is integral to the task, both within the course and the real world, rather than achievable by an individual learner (e.g., Lebow & Wager, 1994; Young, 1993; Gordon, 1998)
6. *Authentic activities provide the opportunity to reflect*
   Activities need to enable learners to make choices and reflect on their learning both individually and socially (e.g., Young, 1993; Myers, 1993; Gordon, 1998)
7. *Authentic activities can be integrated and applied across different subject areas and lead beyond domain-specific outcomes*
   Activities encourage interdisciplinary perspectives and enable diverse roles and expertise rather than a single well-defined field or domain (e.g., Bransford, Sherwood, Hasselbring, Kinzer, & Williams, 1990a; Bransford et al., 1990b; Jonassen, 1991)
8. *Authentic activities are seamlessly integrated with assessment*
   Assessment of activities is seamlessly integrated with the major task in a manner that reflects real world assessment, rather than separate artificial assessment removed from the nature of the task (e.g., Reeves & Okey, 1996; Young, 1995; Herrington & Herrington, 1998)
9. *Authentic activities create polished products valuable in their own right rather than as preparation for something else*
   Activities culminate in the creation of a whole product rather than an exercise or sub-step in preparation for something else (e.g., Barab et al., 2000; Gordon, 1998; Duchastel, 1997)
10. *Authentic activities allow competing solutions and diversity of outcome*
    Activities allow a range and diversity of outcomes open to multiple solutions of an original nature, rather than a single correct response obtained by the application of rules and procedures (e.g., Duchastel, 1997; Bertge & Hasselbring, 1993; Young & McNeese, 1993; Bransford et al., 1990a; Bransford et al., 1990b)

**Investigating Authentic Activities Online**

As stated by Lebow and Wager (1994): 'When authentic activity is the model for appropriate learning activity, the perceptions of the learner and the affordances of the environment represent an integral and inseparable context of learner/environment' (p. 241). The Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt (1990b) describe authentic activities as

"generative" because the completion of the task requires the students to generate other problems to be solved. They draw a distinction between these authentic tasks and simple word problems which already define the problem, such as: "If you travel 150 kilometres at 90 kph, how long will the journey take?" Compare this simple problem with one described by Reeves and Laffey (1999) in an undergraduate engineering course where the students' task is to plan a mission to Mars, and to design a research station including a renewable power source to sustain life once a station is established.

Such activities guide learning in entire courses of study. They are not provided simply to enable students to practice skills taught in more didactic, content-focussed ways. They are integral to the way students approach and study the course, and provide meaning to complex curricula.

At Edith Cowan University, a *Graduate Certificate in Online Teaching and Learning* has been developed according to the guidelines of authentic activity described above. The aim of the course is to assist teachers to have the confidence to design and plan effective online learning environments. The course consists of four units: *Online Teaching and Learning, Resources for Teaching and Learning Online, Designing Effective Online Learning Environments*, and an *Online Learning Project Unit*. The design of the units is characterised by strongly student-centred environments, with authentic and contextualised learning tasks in collaborative settings, using integrated assessment strategies and learning scaffolded by teacher support. The units are designed to be delivered online and to embody a variety of online teaching and learning strategies.

The first unit entitled *Online Teaching and Learning* (Figure 1a) was designed to explore issues associated with the creation of effective learning environments, and draws heavily on recent theory and research. The unit is based upon a task (Figure 1b) where the student takes on a role in a scenario set in a fictitious university. The student is required to evaluate a website that has been set up as an exemplar for a consortium of universities planning to develop a joint online course. The students then, in collaboration with other students ("representatives from the other universities") recommend a set of guidelines for website development, and then redesign the original website (or one of their own choosing) according to these guidelines. While comprising a single sustained task, the activity can be evaluated at three points.

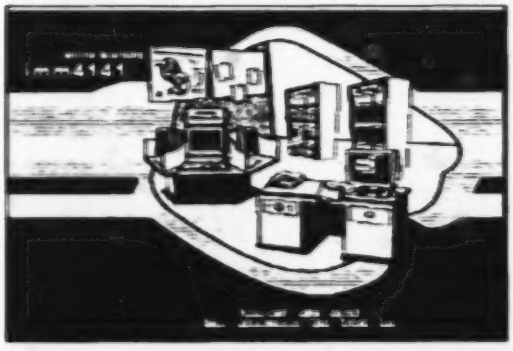

**Figure 1a: The main interface for *Online Teaching and Learning***

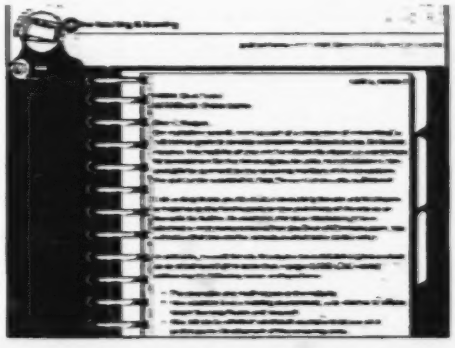

**Figure 1b: The task is presented as a memo**

Our current research funded by the Australian Research Council, entitled *Authentic activity as a model for web-based learning* has sought to investigate examples of courses or units that embody the critical elements described above. Using these characteristics as criteria for the selection of appropriate courses to study, our research has sought to investigate the characteristics of authentic activity that facilitate a whole course unit of study being encapsulated within complex tasks, and to determine the factors that contribute to the successful adoption and implementation of activity-based online course units. We have used the criteria listed above to select courses or units of study that use authentic activities as a central core of their presentation. The units must have a major online component, not simply comprise supplementary material to on-campus delivery. Examples of the types of online courses that use authentic activities are given below.

In a post-graduate unit entitled *Research Preparation: Research Methods*, students do not learn research methods by studying texts describing research methodologies and appropriate applications. Instead they work virtually in a graduate research center (Figure 2a) where they are given the task of investigating the closure of a rural school. They do this using both qualitative and quantitative methods, and they are assisted by two virtual researchers who have collected data from the community and assembled it in a raw form in the center. The students can examine school records, population data, interviews with teachers, parents and community members, newspaper reports and other documents (e.g., Figure 2b). Students produce a report that analyses the impact of the closure of the school on the rural community.



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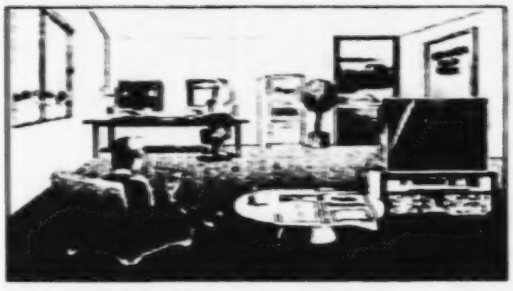

**Figure 2a: The graduate research center**

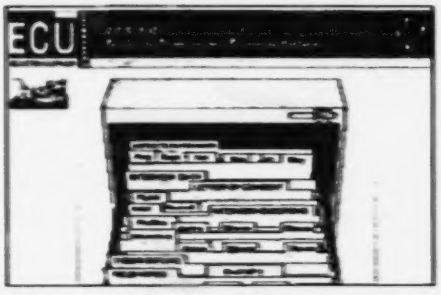


**Figure 2b: Qualitative data in the filing cabinet**

In a semester course entitled *North American Fiction and Film*, (Figure 3a) students study novels written by North American writers such as Melville, Hemingway, DeLillo, Vonnegut, Atwood, and Esquival, and they view film versions of the same works (if appropriate). In the course, they are given the role of Editorial Board Members of an online scholarly journal (Figure 3b), to which they submit book reviews and articles based on their study of the literature. The students collaboratively design a guide for novice reviewers on how to write a book review. The teacher of the course is the journal editor, and an edition of the journal is published online at the end of the semester. A range of literary resources, articles and reviews are accessible from the website. The theoretical and design framework of the course is described in Fitzsimmons (2001).

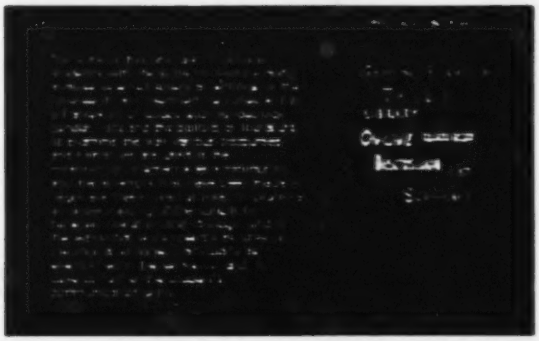

**Figure 3a: Main interface of North American Fiction and Film**

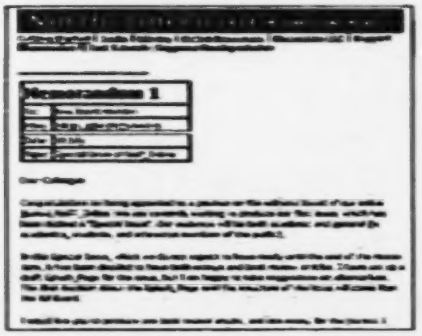


**Figure 3b: Memo inviting students to be part of the Editorial Board**

*Coastal and Marine Systems* is a post-graduate unit where activities are specifically designed to mirror the typical problems that a coastal manager or an environmental consultant might encounter. For example, in one major task (Figure 4a), it is proposed that a marina has been developed, and as part of the approval, annual monitoring of water quality is required. The monitoring encompasses water inside the marina as well as a site several hundred meters outside the marina, in well-flushed ocean conditions. The students are provided with a set of real data collected by the course teachers from inside and outside the marina, and they are required to understand, analyse and interpret the data and draw conclusions as to whether the water quality within the marina is different to that outside, and if so explain the possible causes. The evaluation is presented as a report within the context of the renewal of the marina license. The course is constrained, to a degree, to the requirements of the proprietary software, Blackboard (originally the plan included a more realistic interface with clickable visual links and metaphors) (Figure 4b) but nevertheless, the task incorporates the characteristics of authentic activities described earlier.



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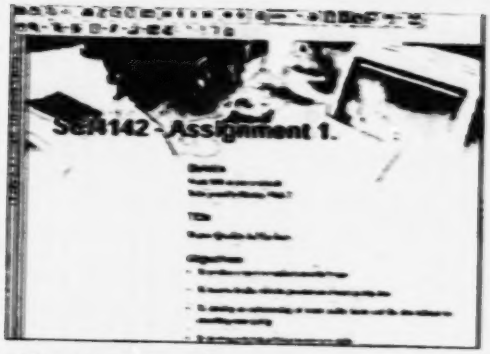


**Figure 4a: Major activity on marina development and water quality**

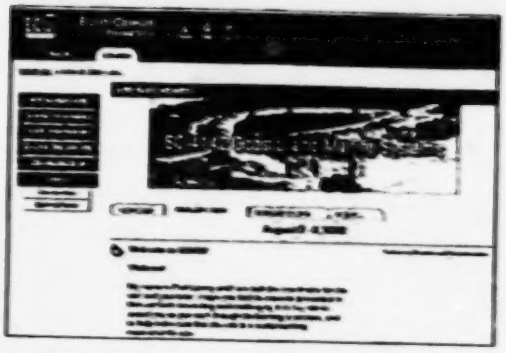

**Figure 4b: Main interface of Coastal and Marine Systems in Blackboard**

In another example of complex activity, Pennell, Durham, Orzog and Spark (1997) described a web-based environment, *Writing in Organisations*, part of the third-year curriculum for Bachelor of Arts (Communication Studies) where students learn business communication skills by accepting temporary employment in a virtual recording company (Figure 5a). They are given a complex task to complete, where they need to prepare a report on whether the company would benefit from the introduction of an internal newsletter. In order to complete this activity, they make appointments, keep a diary, "interview" the director and other employees (Figure 5b), and write letters, and memos as required.

**Figure 5a: Main interface of Virtual Records**

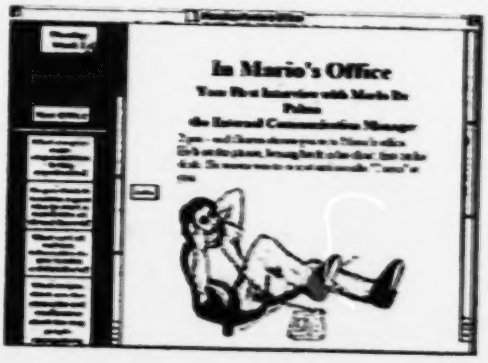


**Figure 5b: Interviewing one of the employees**

While most of the learning environments studied have involved the creation of simulated work places and often incorporate extensive resources such as graphics, video, and sound files, other examples studied are less resource intensive while still retaining fidelity to the authentic characteristics described. For example, in an introductory biology course for online delivery (described in Koenders, 2002) students investigate a simulation of the discovery of new life forms, and are introduced to the interpretation of microscopic images of cellular structures. In the scenario, students are given a role as biologist—one member of an expedition to a remote lake in Siberia where several microorganisms are found that cannot be classified. They 'collect' the specimens and return to the university to analyse them. On the website, they are provided with images of unicellular organisms apparently unknown to science. Students are assigned to groups of four where they analyse the specimens and prepare a report. The scenario is not drawn in an elaborate, resource intensive manner, but built up through the creation of an interesting and engaging idea.

The learning environments described have varying degrees of fidelity to the characteristics of authentic activities defined earlier, but all have strong linkage to real-world professional practice. Teachers, authors, instructional designers, tutors and other associated with the design and delivery of the courses are being interviewed, and the websites analysed. Student responses are being gained through online questionnaires. The research is ongoing, and analysis is focusing on the identification of conceptual



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themes and issues emerging from the data, using techniques such as clustering, and making contrasts and comparisons (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Some Issues Arising from the Research**

While analysis is preliminary at this stage, several trends have emerged, and there are implications not only for the design of online learning environment, but also for the teaching and learning of such courses, and further research efforts .

Generally, the teachers involved in units and courses featuring complex, authentic activities (as described above) are enthusiastic and positive about their teaching and about the quality of student learning in the course. All have found the experience of designing and teaching the course to be professionally enhancing, through their own learning of recent educational research and pedagogy, through the experience of teaching in new and innovative ways, and in many cases through publications and conference presentations about the course and other professional activities.

One theme which has emerged strongly from a number of different sources in our research is the nature of authenticity, and how "authentic" environments are often the creation of the teachers', authors' and instructional designers' imaginations, and are thus inevitably someone's *view* of what is authentic. Petraglia (1998) has been critical of this shortcoming, calling it "the real world on a short leash" (p. 53). There is nevertheless, much evidence to suggest that these learning environments can provide a great deal of meaning to otherwise decontextualised facts and skills, and can enhance the transfer of deep and lifelong learning (Barab & Landa, 1997). At what point do students become engaged, if ever, in these scenarios? Is there a pattern to their acceptance of the terms of the authenticity, and how important is the suspension of disbelief? (Herrington, Oliver, & Reeves, 2002).

Another recurring theme is time, in terms of both the teachers' and the students' commitment to authentic activities. Many of the teachers interviewed to date have mentioned the inordinate amount of time involved in both the preparation of the authentic tasks and environments, and the teaching of the online course. Teachers also reported that students were likely to spend much more time on the tasks, some complaining of the demands, others appreciative of the sense of deep engagement they experienced with the learning context. The time commitment problem has also been noted in many other authentic learning environments, some of which have reverted to more traditional modes despite strong evidence of effectiveness, including the Mission to Mars engineering course described earlier (Reeves & Laffey, 1999). If the large time commitment is a "labor of love", willingly given by the intellectual owners of the course, it is also likely that this commitment is not sustainable over the long term, and courses based on authentic tasks will be abandoned for more manageable—and more traditional—lecture/tutorial modes of instruction.

Proponents of authentic activities as described here are generally enthusiastic and committed teachers who willingly provide time and effort beyond the usual expectations. Further research may help to identify authentic activities in online units that are offered to large student cohorts. Investigation of large scale, successful initiatives will possibly yield a great deal of information on how these environments can be sustained with standard resources and faculty allocations, rather than an abundance of goodwill and generosity on the part of teachers. Longer term studies may also reveal the kinds of support that host institutions can develop to facilitate course units employing authentic and complex activities.

It is hoped that analysis of our own and further research data will help to suggest those characteristics of authentic activity that facilitate a whole course unit of study being encapsulated successfully within complex tasks, and to determine the factors that contribute to the successful and sustainable adoption and implementation of activity-based online course units.

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**Acknowledgements**

Thanks to my co-researchers Professor Tom Reeves and Professor Ron Oliver, to the Australian Research Council for funding the research, and to the teachers authors and instructional designers of the courses described, for their thoughtful and considerate participation, and for permission to reproduce pictures of their websites: Trevor Bennett, Clare Brook, Marsha Durham, John Fitzsimmons, Jan Gray, Annette Koenders, Paul Lavery, Maria Northcote, Russ Pennell, Heather Sparrow; and the University of Western Sydney, Central Queensland University, and Edith Cowan University.

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